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ABSTRACT

Secondary education in the United Kingdom is gradually being reorganized along "comprehensive" lines, although there is still resistance to it. Stemming from the Butler Education Act of 1944, a tripartite secondary system emerged, comprised of the grammar (for superior students), the technical (for average and above average students), and the modern (for average or below average students). After adoption of a bilateral system, omitting the secondary grammar school, the next logical step was toward a comprehensive school with no selection criteria. Feeling that it would destroy academic standards, many educators resisted the change. This occasional paper describes the experiences of a British social studies educator when in 1968, a secondary grammar school merged with a modern school. Separate school sites created some problems for staff and students and destroyed the desired unity. Findings by 1971 indicate that most problems created by split building sites had been met; that teacher changeover from the grammar to comprehensive was somewhat traumatic; that a great deal of experimentation took place and continues; that academic achievement is as high now as it was before integration; and lastly, that the first five years were a challenge to make education more relevant. (SJM)

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Occasional Paper #8

GOING COMPREHENSIVE: EXPERIENCE OF A BRITISH SOCIAL STUDIES DEPARTMENT HEAD

by

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PREFACE

Compulsory school attendance in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland begins at age 5 and continues through age 15--although many pupils remain in school after the minimum leaving age. Between the ages of 10 1/2 and 12, children make the transition from primary to secondary school.

Heretofore, the movement of pupils from primary to secondary schools had been made on a highly selective basis, the object of which was to determine the pupil's fitness for and ability to profit by an "academic" or "non-academic" education.

There is now a conscious attempt on the part of the British Government to use education as an instrument of social and economic policy with a definite thrust toward elimination of separation in secondary education. Secondary education is being reorganized along "comprehensive" lines.

The proportion of secondary pupils in comprehensive schools has been rising in recent years and the projection is that this trend will continue. According to the UNESCO World Survey of Education (Paris: UNESCO, 1971), as of October, 1969, 25 per cent of all pupils in "maintained" (i.e. publicly maintained, no fee payable) secondary schools in England and Wales were in comprehensive schools.

Mr. Ray Weir is Head of the Social Studies Department of one of these comprehensive secondary schools--Southgate School, Sussex Way, Cockfosters, Herts, England. This Occasional Paper, a highly personal document, describes a British educator's experience with "going comprehensive."

Stony Brook, New York

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The English School System is based mainly on the Butler Education Act of 1944. Mr. R. A. Butler was a prominent member of the Conservative Party and in 1944 of Sir Winston Churchill's wartime Coalition Government. He is now Master of Trinity College in the University of Cambridge. The Butler Act instituted an orderly system of National Secondary Schooling to educate pupils "according to age, aptitude, and ability."

There emerged the Tripartite System. In most urban areas, three types of school were provided--(1) the Secondary Grammar School (for the ablest pupils - 20 per cent), (2) the Secondary Technical School (for those of average or above average ability and having a practical aptitude - 20 per cent), (3) the Secondary Modern School (for the average and below average pupil - 60 per cent).

The Bilateral System adopted by some Education Authorities broke down the Tripartite formula into (1) Grammar-Technical and (2) Secondary Modern Schools. Both schools might be located on the same campus to encourage cooperation and facilitate the transfer of pupils if deemed desirable.

The next logical step was to move toward the Comprehensive School, taking the whole Secondary intake of the school's "cachement area," without selection of any kind--like the "neighborhood school" or Public High School in the United States.

Many professional educationists and a wide range of non-professional groups, but with an interest in education, resisted the change, fearing that Comprehensive reorganisation would lower academic standards and that the weaker pupils would slow down the progress of the élite.

The Education Authority under which I had served as a teacher "daringly" sponsored the provision of two Comprehensive Schools as early as 1953, as a cautious experiment. Even now in 1972 "Comprehensive" is inclined to be a "dirty" word and many Education Author-

ities have still not materially departed from the old Tripartite System. Some have refused point blank to "go Comprehensive," despite pressure from the Ministry of Education and Science for the Comprehensive School to become the norm.

Under a Labor Government, the pace of change quickened in the 1960's. The present Minister of Education, Mrs. Thatcher, in the Heath Conservative Government, has tended to slow down the process and recently came out openly against hastily conceived schemes and "giant factory type Comprehensive Schools." This will mean the end under the present Government of schemes for schools planned to have over 1500 pupils. Mrs. Thatcher said, in addressing a Teacher's Conference, "there may come a point when increasing the size of a school to provide greater variety of subject choice becomes counter-productive." She meant that in oversize schools there can be a vital loss of personal contact between teacher and pupil. The school becomes too impersonal. The Inner London Education Authority has schools of 2000 pupils. Head Teachers generally regard schools of 1000 pupils as a reasonable maximum.

During my teaching career, dating back to 1950, I taught for just over a year in an East London Technical School and then for 16 years in a mixed Grammar School of 600 boys and girls. In 1967 my Education Authority "went Comprehensive." The Education Committee had considered 5 separate schemes of reorganisation and came out in favour of the "all-through" Comprehensive on one campus for ages 11 to 18 years. The snag was that none was purpose built and all but a very few secondary schools were unable to expand on their existing sites. With a "stroke of the pen" all secondary schools in the Borough became Comprehensive as from September, 1967.

The bulk of the schools therefore were subjected to a series of "shotgun weddings." The Grammar School in which I taught was "married" to the nearest Modern School (about 1 and 1/4 miles away) to become Southgate Comprehensive School. This pattern was repeated.

Southgate School is now in its fifth year as a Comprehensive. It is a mixed school of about 1250 pupils. One of the first problems of the newly appointed Headmaster was to integrate the two teaching staffs harmoniously. A minority, mainly the Grammar School teachers, sought other posts but the majority remained. The Headmaster wisely used the various posts of responsibility at his disposal to reorganise the status and experience of his combined teaching staff. Generally, some Graduate teachers became Heads of Departments, while a number of the non-graduates were given posts of a pastoral-organisational nature such as that of Year Head or Careers Adviser.

Regulations forbade the movement of pupils between the two sites, so inevitably the "all-through" ideal could not be realised. Instead, the Lower School took pupils to the end of the 3rd year, the Upper School, pupils from the 4th year upwards. Thus the Lower School pupils, apart from special occasions, only know of the existence of the Upper School, whilst the 4th year pupils feel that they have lost one school and are entering a "new" school. This is to some extent mitigated by part of the staff commuting between buildings, i.e. taking in both Upper and Lower School. All this presents considerable timetable problems. I, as Head of the Social Sciences, teach 55 per cent in the Upper and 45 per cent in the Lower School, but another Department Head teaches 90 per cent and 10 per cent respectively.

There was at first some animosity between pupils--both former Grammar and Modern pupils resented the pattern of their education being interfered with. The Grammar pupils in particular resented the "intruders" but as time passed these groups worked their way through the school and each new intake brought an increasing acceptance of the Comprehensive principle.

In the Autumn of 1970 and Spring of 1971, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Schools descended on Southgate School in force, charged with the task of assessing the degree to which the problems created

by divided buildings had been met and overcome. The School received a very thorough inspection and a very favourable report was made. It is, of course, hoped that when money and land are available, the "split" school will go, but this is likely to take a very long time indeed to achieve.

The changeover was a somewhat traumatic experience for the staff, especially those who had only taught in Grammar School. They were faced with the challenge of teaching pupils of very modest ability, with disciplinary problems arising out of this and with the need for radical rethinking both in terms of curriculum and methodology.

In my own Department, we have been experimenting continuously. We have greatly expanded our use of material resources both aural and visual. "Talk and Chalk" is much less evident and we have created a library of Tape Recordings, Filmstrips, Wall Charts, and reference books for individual assignments. Educational TV programmes are used where appropriate. The wealth of London's Historic buildings are available and community links are forged through outside speakers visiting the school.

My subject is History, but it is compulsory only to the end of the 3rd year. I have recast the History Syllabus so that 3rd year pupils deal with 19th and 20th century themes, e.g. Great Revolutions, Great Wars, Toward a More Humane Society. In the 4th year, apart from courses leading to external examinations, I have introduced as a pupil choice a course on the U.S.A. in the 20th Century, dealing not only with her History, but with the broad spectrum of American life and social problems.

As for those who feared a drop in academic standards, at Southgate School, at any rate, this has not happened. Our achievement, measured in terms of success in external examinations, is at least as high as before the change, and long experienced and highly qualified staff have agreed that their initial fears have not materialised. Much remains to be done but these first five years

have been both a challen ge and a stimulus to make the education we provide more meaningful to our pupils.